

Oaklands College

REPORT FROM
THE INSPECTORATE
1999-00

THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL

***THE FURTHER EDUCATION
FUNDING COUNCIL***

The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education according to a four-year cycle. It also inspects other further education provision funded by the FEFC. In fulfilling its work programme, the inspectorate assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

College inspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circulars 97/12, 97/13 and 97/22. Inspections seek to validate the data and judgements provided by colleges in self-assessment reports. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work they inspect. A member of the Council's audit service works with inspectors in assessing aspects of governance and management. All colleges are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member.

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Grade Descriptors

Inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the report. They use a five-point scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses.

The descriptors for the grades are:

- grade 1 – outstanding provision which has many strengths and few weaknesses
- grade 2 – good provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses
- grade 3 – satisfactory provision with strengths but also some weaknesses
- grade 4 – less than satisfactory provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths
- grade 5 – poor provision which has few strengths and many weaknesses.

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

Aggregated grades for aspects of cross-college provision and curriculum areas, for colleges inspected during 1998-99, are shown in the following table.

	Grade				
	1	2	3	4	5
	%	%	%	%	%
Curriculum areas	10	53	30	7	–
Cross-college provision	14	54	23	7	2

Source: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report*
Sample size: 104 college inspections

Student Achievements

Where data on student achievements appear in tables, levels of achievement are shown in three ways:

- as number of starters, which is the number of enrolments on qualifications where the student was expecting to complete the qualification that college year. For example, a student on a two-year programme who began their programme in October 1995, would appear in the results for 1996-97 because this is the year in which they expected to complete their qualification
- as a retention rate, which is the percentage of qualifications which students have completed as expected or where they are continuing their studies beyond the expected end date of the qualification. For programmes of study of two years or more, retention is calculated across the whole programme, that is, from the start to the end of the qualification
- as an achievement rate, which is the number of qualifications students have fully achieved as a percentage of completed qualifications with a known outcome. Partial achievements are not included.

Summary

Oaklands College

Eastern Region

Inspected March 2000

Oaklands College is a general further education college located on sites in St Albans, Welwyn Garden City and Borehamwood. The self-assessment report was thorough and comprehensive. It was produced by following well-established procedures for quality assurance and involved contributions from governors and staff at all levels. The report was subject to a critical internal assessment process. Strengths and weaknesses were clearly identified and were supported by a wide range of appropriate evidence. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report and with seven of the 12 grades proposed by the college. Since the self-assessment report was written, the college has acted to remedy some of the weaknesses.

The college offers provision in all FEFC programme areas. Provision in six of these areas was inspected, in addition to the support for basic skills and aspects of cross-college provision. The quality of teaching and learning has improved since the last inspection in May 1997. Inspectors judged 68% of lessons to be good or outstanding compared with 63% at the last inspection. Although there are some poor achievements on specific programmes, achievement overall has shown some improvement over the last three years. College data provided at the time of the inspection suggest that a decline in retention rates has been arrested. Students have good access to a wide range of services.

Their views on courses and college services are frequently sought and action is taken to address their concerns. Students receive sound guidance on entry to the college. There are effective arrangements to identify and organise any additional support which they need. The college has an effective accommodation strategy. As a consequence, sound progress has been made in developing physical resources since the last inspection, though much remains to be done. College managers are committed to improving standards; all aspects of the college's work are subject to self-assessment against explicit criteria. Arrangements for the professional development of staff are well managed and effective. Management is good. Staff were thoroughly consulted about a large-scale reorganisation of the staffing structure which was subsequently accomplished with minimal disruption. Communications in the college are effective. Curriculum management is sound. Weaknesses in the college's management information system have restricted the effective use of data. The college makes good use of the wide range of expertise on the governing body. Corporation members have a clear oversight of the strategic direction of the college. Their monitoring of the college's performance has been hampered by the inadequacy of the quantitative information which they receive. The college should improve: the collection and recording of information on students' achievements; the review and recording of students' progress; the poor quality of some accommodation; and the operation of some areas of governance.

The grades awarded as a result of the inspection are given below.

Curriculum area	Grade	Cross-college provision	Grade
Equine studies	2	Support for students	2
Construction	2	General resources	3
Business	3	Quality assurance	2
Health and social care	1	Governance	3
English and communication studies	3	Management	2
Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	2		
Basic skills	2		

The College and its Mission

1 Oaklands College is a large general further education college. It was established in 1991 as part of the restructuring of further education in Hertfordshire from the merger of three colleges: de Havilland College, St Albans City College and Hertfordshire College of Agriculture and Horticulture. The college is located about 20 miles north of London and has a wide catchment area in three local authority districts in mid and south Hertfordshire, namely Hertsmere, Welwyn Hatfield and St Albans and District. The college has four major campuses and a number of smaller sites. It also offers courses in a variety of community venues.

2 Hertfordshire is one of the most prosperous counties in England. Unemployment rates in the college's catchment area are 1.4%, which is below county and national averages, although there are pockets of high unemployment and deprivation in parts of Hatfield and Borehamwood. The population of the three local authority areas is approximately 500,000. Some 6% of the population of the college's catchment area are from minority ethnic and linguistic groups, drawn mainly from the Asian subcontinent and, in particular, from Bangladesh.

3 A high percentage of people living in the college's catchment area who are in employment travel outside Hertfordshire for their work. This is particularly true of the residents of St Albans and District, a large number of whom work in London. A significant decline in manufacturing industry in south Hertfordshire over the last decade has reflected the demise of the defence industry and the closure of British Aerospace in Hatfield. The county's economy has become centred on small and medium-sized enterprises, a growing service sector, and the headquarters and distribution centres for large national and international companies.

4 Over 80% of 16-year olds in the college's catchment area continue in some form of full-time education and training. In 1998,

56% remained at school and 25% transferred to further education. The achievements of 16-year-olds in Hertfordshire are among the highest in the Further Education Funding Council's (FEFC's) Eastern Region. All the 27 secondary schools in the college's catchment area have sixth forms.

5 The college offers courses, from entry/foundation level to higher education, in all programme areas funded by the FEFC. It aims to maintain this extensive provision to meet the education and training needs of the diverse communities in mid and south Hertfordshire. The college has embraced the concept of inclusive learning as the major principle underlying all its strategic and operational planning. It has implemented a number of initiatives that focus on the needs of the student including a comprehensive range of support services and the introduction of senior tutors to support all curriculum areas. The college's key strategic aims include working collaboratively with other providers of education and training to improve the quality and relevance of its own curriculum. To help to achieve that aim the college has become an associate college of the University of Hertfordshire, works in a well-established and successful consortium with local secondary schools in Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield, and collaborates regularly with other further education colleges in the county.

6 The college's organisational structure was reviewed and reorganised between January 1998 and August 1999. The college's executive team comprises the principal, deputy principal, director of finance and property and three directors of curriculum. There are 32 senior managers, including the executive team.

7 The college's mission is 'to provide high-quality, viable and accessible learning opportunities, which meet the education and training needs of the local communities and of employers'.

Context

The Inspection

8 The college was inspected in March 2000. Before the inspection, inspectors reviewed the college's self-assessment report and considered information about the college held by other directorates of the FEFC. The college provided data on students' achievements for 1999, which were checked by inspectors against primary sources of evidence, such as registers and the pass lists issued by awarding bodies. Most were found to be reliable. Many aspects of the data from the individualised student record (ISR) for the years 1997 and 1998 were unreliable. The college provided its own data for these years. Inspectors checked a sample of these data in order to provide the inspection team with evidence for their judgements. These revised data are quoted only in the text of the report and are not reproduced in data tables.

9 The college was notified of the sample of work to be inspected two months before the inspection. The inspection was carried out by 16 inspectors and an auditor, working for a total of 65 days. They observed 92 lessons, six of which were tutorials, and examined students' work and a variety of college documents. They met students, college governors, managers and staff.

10 The following table shows the grades given to the lessons inspected and the national profile for all colleges inspected in 1998-99. Of the lessons inspected, 68% were judged to be good or outstanding, slightly higher than the national average of 65% and 7% were judged to be less than satisfactory, compared with a national average of 6%.

Lessons: inspection grades by programme of study

Programme	Grade					Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	
GCE A/AS level and GCSE	0	6	4	2	0	12
GNVQ	5	5	3	1	0	14
NVQ	1	6	3	1	0	11
Other vocational	7	10	3	1	0	21
Other*	4	19	10	1	0	34
Total (No.)	17	46	23	6	0	92
Total (%)	18	50	25	7	0	100
National average, all inspected colleges 1998-99 (%)	20	45	29	6	0	100

Source for national average: *Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report*

*includes basic skills, tutorials, access to higher education lessons and lessons for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

Context

11 The following table shows the attendance rates in the lessons observed and the national average for all colleges inspected in 1998-99.

Attendance rates in lessons observed

	Average number of students	Average attendance (%)
Oaklands College	9.0	78
National average, all inspected colleges 1998-99	11.2	78

Source for national average: Quality and Standards in Further Education in England 1998-99: Chief inspector's annual report

Curriculum Areas

Equine Studies

Grade 2

12 Inspectors observed 14 lessons. They agreed with most judgements expressed in the self-assessment report, but identified additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- good practical experience for students
- a good and appropriate range of teaching and learning activities
- a wide range of courses
- productive arrangements for work experience
- good support and guidance for students
- effective curriculum management

Weaknesses

- poor achievement in British Horse Society examinations
- poor links with industry
- insufficient opportunity to gain additional vocational qualifications

13 The college offers courses in horse care from foundation to advanced level. It has developed a higher national diploma programme to allow progression to higher education. A 'Landmark' course, to help students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities to achieve the transition from school, has been developed, in addition to vocational skills courses at entry level.

14 There is a good range of teaching methods and learning activities. The balance of theoretical teaching and practical instruction is complemented by the involvement of students in assessed yard duties. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that teaching of practical skills is good. Knowledgeable teachers make effective use of well-managed yard facilities. In one riding lesson, students were

jumping a small course of fences. The tutor's encouragement enabled all the students, despite some nervousness, to improve. In a 'Landmark' lesson small groups of students worked on the points of the horse. They were given clear tasks and worked together to allocate responsibilities. The groups wrote the points of the horse on sticky labels and stuck them on the appropriate parts of the horse. Staff are aware that students need to work to industry standards. Students have time targets for assessed practical tasks. The standard of teaching of theory is uneven. The best theory lessons were well planned, and contained an appropriate variety of activities. The aims of the lessons were shared with the students all of whom concentrated on the work. In weaker theory lessons, the pace of teaching was too slow, lacked appropriate variety and did not sustain students' interest. Worksheets and handouts used to supplement the teaching varied in quality. Some were well produced. Others were poor photocopies of texts that were at an inappropriate level for the students. Assignments are well planned and appropriately varied. National diploma students were required by an assignment brief to prepare and present themselves and a horse for a show. The event was organised as a realistic showing class, and tutors acted as judges for the event. Key skills are underdeveloped and are not integrated with the curriculum. Each student's level of ability in key skills is checked on entry to the course, but key skills are only assessed if this is a requirement of the target award. There is no opportunity for students to develop key skills to a higher level than is required by the award.

15 The curriculum is well managed. Academic and support staff work well together as a team. Students receive an effective induction and are placed on courses at an appropriate level. Some groups of students working towards qualifications at different levels have been combined for teaching purposes. In practical lessons, students are able to be taught with others of the same level, ensuring

Curriculum Areas

individual needs are fully met. However, in some theory lessons, for instance where national vocational qualification (NVQ) level 1 and 2 students are combined, there has been insufficient planning to ensure similar success in meeting individual needs. Teachers give considerable informal support and guidance. All full-time students have a review at the end of every term.

16 Teachers have a wide variety of commercial vocational experience, which they use effectively to help students to learn. This was a strength noted in the self-assessment report. Students clearly respect the technical expertise of the staff. Full-time diploma students have planned periods of work experience. Tutors help students to find suitable placements and visit them during their work experience. National diploma students have a six-month block of work experience prior to beginning their second year. This arrangement ensures that students develop a good awareness of the competence requirements of the industry. Other links with industry are poor. The equine

industrial liaison group has not met for two years. Employers are not involved in course evaluation or review. These shortcomings were not identified as a weakness in the self-assessment report.

17 Rates for retention and achievement on full-time courses are slightly above national benchmarks in most years. Most full-time students achieve NVQ awards in addition to their primary qualifications. There is insufficient opportunity for them to achieve other additional qualifications, such as first aid, a weakness not recognised in the self-assessment report. The college's achievement in British Horse Society examinations is poor. The college has only recently gained approval as a stage 1 examination centre and has not received formal notification of the achievements of their students who have taken the examination at other centres. Few enrolled part-time students actually take the British Horse Society examination. A high proportion of students progress to further courses or secure employment on completion of their studies.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in equine studies, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
NVQ horse care**	1 to 3	Number of starters	*	*	118
		Retention (%)	*	*	85
		Achievement (%)	*	*	61
British Horse Society horse knowledge and riding**	1 to 3	Number of starters	*	*	77
		Retention (%)	*	*	82
		Achievement (%)	*	*	6
Horse studies first diploma (one-year, full-time course)	2	Number of starters	*	*	10
		Retention (%)	*	*	90
		Achievement (%)	*	*	89
National certificate (one-year, full-time course)	2	Number of starters	*	*	25
		Retention (%)	*	*	80
		Achievement (%)	*	*	95
National diploma (two-year, full-time course)	3	Number of starters	*	*	31
		Retention (%)	*	*	81
		Achievement (%)	*	*	88

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

*data may be unreliable

**mainly taken as additional courses by full-time students

Curriculum Areas

Construction

Grade 2

18 Inspectors observed 10 lessons. They agreed with most of the college's judgements but considered that some weaknesses had been understated and that some strengths had not been identified.

Key strengths

- the comprehensive range of provision
- consistently good teaching
- the thorough monitoring of students' progress
- excellent links with the construction industry
- well-planned and well-managed provision
- good development of key skills

Weaknesses

- low achievement rates on some courses
- poor punctuality at lessons
- insufficient follow-up of student absence
- some cramped accommodation

19 The college offers a wide range of construction courses from vocational entry level awards to degrees in building and quantity surveying. Enrolments on the NVQ level 2 course have increased over the last three years. However, over the same period enrolments on the general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) advanced course in construction and the built environment have decreased. Inspectors agreed with the college that the curriculum area has excellent links with the construction industry. A member of the corporation is chair of the construction advisory body. Liaison committees include architects, building services engineers, civil engineers and builders. Courses are well managed. There is a planned schedule of team meetings and students' rates of achievement, retention and attendance are

closely scrutinised. Staff review the performance of the provision thoroughly three times each year.

20 Teaching is good. Lessons are well planned and teachers use an appropriate range of methods to engage and maintain students' interest. Students work well in practical lessons; health and safety is given a high priority. For example, in one session a misuse of hand tools was promptly and effectively corrected by the teacher. Some lessons observed were disrupted by the late arrival of several students, a shortcoming acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Comprehensive study packs have been prepared to help students to work at their own pace at a time convenient to them. All courses develop the key skills of numeracy, communications and information technology (IT). In a lesson on plumbing, students effectively used computers to calculate heat loss from radiators of different sizes. Assignment briefs and tasks are well structured, interesting and appropriately related to the construction industry. Students' work is marked thoroughly, using clear assessment criteria. Teachers' written feedback is comprehensive and often includes comments about spelling and grammar. Students' progress is carefully monitored. At regular intervals each student is interviewed to check progress and an action plan to improve performance is agreed. GNVQ advanced students have well-planned and relevant work placements which complement their college studies. Students have good opportunities to work with partner colleges in Europe. For example there are plans for some students to work in Holland with Dutch students on a reinforced concrete project and others with small to medium-sized companies in Germany.

21 Teachers are appropriately qualified and most have assessor and verifier qualifications. Classrooms are suitably equipped. Some rooms at the St Albans City campus are drab and in need of redecoration and refurbishment. The available workshop space for electrical

Curriculum Areas

installation is not sufficient to meet local demand, a weakness identified in the self-assessment report. Hand and power tools are sufficient to meet the needs of the courses and are effectively maintained. There is a wide range of modern surveying instruments and well-equipped resources centres for plumbing and electrical installation. A materials test laboratory is available. Resource centres have a good stock of books, magazines and journals. Students make effective use of the software in the up-to-date computing facilities.

22 Students' written work is generally well presented and is of a very high standard. Students frequently use IT, including digital photography and scanning, to enhance presentation of their work. Portfolios of

evidence are comprehensive and include evidence obtained from the workplace. The achievement data for 1997 and 1998 provided for inspection were found to be unreliable. The college-prepared data for 1999 were accurate. The achievement rate for all NVQ level 2 craft trades was above the national average for the sector in 1999. The self-assessment report did not identify that NVQ level 1 and GNVQ achievements were below the national averages. Inspectors did not agree with the college that the retention rate on the majority of courses exceeds the national average. Over the last two years the retention rate on the site supervision course has been excellent at 100%. The retention and pass rates on gas safety courses are good.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in construction, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
Foundation vocational (crafts)	1	Number of starters	*	*	139
		Retention (%)	*	*	68
		Achievement (%)	*	*	53
Intermediate vocational (crafts)	2	Number of starters	*	*	240
		Retention (%)	*	*	76
		Achievement (%)	*	*	67
Advanced vocational (crafts)	3	Number of starters	*	*	72
		Retention (%)	*	*	83
		Achievement (%)	*	*	71
Advanced vocational (technicians)	3	Number of starters	*	*	53
		Retention (%)	*	*	58
		Achievement (%)	*	*	52
NVQ in site supervision	3 and 4	Number of starters	*	*	28
		Retention (%)	*	*	100
		Achievement (%)	*	*	64

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

*data may be unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Business

Grade 3

23 Inspectors observed 18 lessons. They broadly agreed with the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- effective course management
- high retention rates on integrated business technology and general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) business studies
- the broad range of courses
- the high standard of specialist learning materials

Weaknesses

- poor pass rates on some courses
- poor retention and pass rates on GNVQ advanced business
- inadequate training offices

24 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that there is a wide range of provision, from entry level to higher education, which includes courses in business studies, administration, office technology, and professional courses in accounting and marketing. The provision has been extended to meet the needs of a broader range of students. A wide choice of subjects in administration and office technology is offered on a part-time basis. A vocational award at entry level has recently been introduced, providing students with the opportunity to sample courses in business, retail and leisure. Course management is effective. Course files are well maintained. Teachers meet and review courses regularly. Minutes from meetings are recorded carefully and include clear action points.

25 Schemes of work and lessons are well planned. Aims and objectives are clearly stated. Inspectors agreed with the college that most teaching is good. In a GNVQ foundation lesson, students took roles within a sales simulation to develop their understanding of effective communication and body language. The exercise was assessed both by the teacher and the students themselves. In a wordprocessing lesson for beginners, students worked effectively and confidently on individual tasks. The teacher made effective use of individual and group work to promote a wider understanding of the subject. A few lessons failed to stimulate the students and make appropriate demands on them. In one lesson the teacher spent too much of the time talking while using overhead transparency slides and lost the students' attention. Attendance is poor at some lessons. The self-assessment report acknowledges that students are often late for lessons; during the inspection lateness was not challenged by teachers.

26 Students' portfolios of work are generally well organised and well presented. GNVQ assignments are effectively designed, vocationally relevant and include the assessment of key skills. Teachers mark students' work thoroughly. However, their written feedback to students varies in depth and quality. Work experience makes an effective contribution to students' learning on the business programmes. The college checks on the work experience offered by providers to ensure that there is an appropriate range of activities for students. GNVQ and NVQ level 3 students undertake work experience as an integral part of their course. Tutors visit students on placement to assess and monitor their progress. GNVQ advanced level students have the opportunity to enrich their understanding of European business by participating in a foreign study trip.

Curriculum Areas

27 Students have access to a good range of up-to-date workbooks, examination papers and information packs. The administration training offices do not reflect current business practice and lack modern business equipment. This shortcoming was not identified in the self-assessment report. Teachers have relevant qualifications, and have good opportunities to update their professional expertise. Teaching rooms are generally clean and tidy but are dull; they lack stimulating, vocationally relevant displays.

28 Inspectors agreed with the college that retention and pass rates have fluctuated over the past three years. Retention rates are good on some office technology courses and on the GCE A level business studies course. For the

last three years, retention rates on the integrated business technology level 2 course and on a number of single-subject secretarial courses have been above 90%. However, the pass rate for integrated business technology level 2 is below the national average. The retention rate on the administration NVQ level 2 programme is close to the national average for the sector, but the pass rate fell to 69% in 1999. Retention and pass rates for some courses are poor. The retention rate on the diploma in administrative and secretarial procedures has declined over the past three years to 65%. In 1997 and 1998 the pass rate was well below the national average but has improved significantly in 1999.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in business, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
NVQ administration (one-year course)	2	Number of starters	*	*	48
		Retention (%)	*	*	76
		Achievement (%)	*	*	69
Integrated business technology	2	Number of starters	*	*	157
		Retention (%)	*	*	92
		Achievement (%)	*	*	46
GNVQ intermediate business	2	Number of starters	*	*	65
		Retention (%)	*	*	70
		Achievement (%)	*	*	80
NVQ administration (one-year course)	3	Number of starters	*	*	8
		Retention (%)	*	*	88
		Achievement (%)	*	*	75
Diploma in administrative and secretarial procedures	3	Number of starters	*	*	17
		Retention (%)	*	*	65
		Achievement (%)	*	*	82
GNVQ advanced business	3	Number of starters	*	*	103
		Retention (%)	*	*	55
		Achievement (%)	*	*	73

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

*data may be unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Health and Social Care

Grade 1

29 Inspectors observed 10 lessons and one tutorial. Inspectors agreed with most of the college's judgements on strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report, but identified additional strengths and one additional weakness.

Key strengths

- consistently high standards of teaching and learning
- the effective contribution of work experience to students' learning
- the high level of students' achievements
- good NVQ provision
- good curriculum management

Weaknesses

- lack of breadth in part-time provision

30 There is a good range of full-time courses and opportunities for progression from entry level to higher education. NVQ courses are organised to meet the needs of an extensive range of students who can enrol throughout the year. Training and assessment are carried out in the workplace to accommodate students who work shifts. The college is widening participation by providing tutor support in the workplace for students who would not otherwise follow a college course. Although part-time courses offer many opportunities for those requiring job-specific programmes, there is no broad-based programme for adults who are unsure about their future choices. This weakness was not included in the self-assessment report. Opportunities for additional qualifications are taken up by many students and the area is involved in the piloting of the GNVQ single award. The curriculum area is well managed. Course teams meet regularly

to monitor and review the provision. Planning is thorough. Liaison with employers is effective. Work experience is well organised and an integral part of all full-time courses. Students are thoroughly prepared for their placements and their progress is carefully monitored and evaluated. Teachers relate students' work experience to their college studies effectively. None of these strengths was included in the self-assessment report.

31 The standard of teaching is consistently high across the sites. All lessons observed by inspectors were good or outstanding. Lessons are well planned and well organised to take account of individual students' needs. Teachers use a wide range of methods to gain students' attention and maintain their interest. Students display high levels of motivation. They work well individually and in groups and value each others' views and opinions. Equal opportunities are actively promoted. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the key skills of communication and IT are effectively integrated with vocational studies. In a challenging GNVQ advanced lesson there was a lively debate on social policy where students displayed good oral and interactive skills. GNVQ intermediate students developed their communication and interpersonal skills through imaginative role-play exercises. Students made good use of the excellent media suite to video-record the exercise for subsequent evaluation. Assignments are imaginative and stimulate students' interest. Teachers provide detailed and supportive written feedback on assignments to help students improve their work. Students' work is of a good standard and portfolios are consistently well organised and well presented. Many students use their IT skills to good effect in assignment work.

32 Staff are well qualified and experienced. They are effectively deployed to help students with their work. Accommodation is satisfactory. There are well-equipped suites for IT and media work at the Welwyn Garden City campus.

Curriculum Areas

Technician support is good. The self-assessment report identifies the lack of a specialist learning base at the St Albans City campus. Students have good access to computers in the resource centres but there is insufficient use of computers in classrooms for teaching and learning.

33 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that achievement rates are good. Pass rates on the GNVQ intermediate and advanced and the NVQ level 2 course have been well above the national average for the past two years. Over the same period, the pass rate on the NVQ level 3 course improved significantly and in 1999 was above the national average. All full-time students take a first-aid qualification to enhance their employment opportunities and nearly all students achieve the additional award. Many students also achieve a basic food hygiene certificate. The retention rates on most courses have improved over the last two years and current college data indicate that this trend is continuing. For example, in 1999 the retention rate on the NVQ level 2

course was at the national average and on the level 3 course it was below, but in the current year both courses are showing marked improvement in the rates of retention.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in health and social care, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
GNVQ intermediate	2	Number of starters	15	*	9
		Retention (%)	80	*	89
		Achievement (%)	67	*	88
NVQ care	2	Number of starters	*	*	176
		Retention (%)	*	*	74
		Achievement (%)	*	*	73
GNVQ advanced	3	Number of starters	*	*	27
		Retention (%)	*	*	74
		Achievement (%)	*	*	85
NVQ care	3	Number of starters	*	*	11
		Retention (%)	*	*	73
		Achievement (%)	*	*	62

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

*data may be unreliable

Curriculum Areas

English and Communication Studies

Grade 3

34 Inspectors observed 12 lessons. They agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment report but found that the college had overestimated the standard of teaching and learning and underestimated the weakness in rates of student retention.

Key strengths

- good achievement in English GCE A level subjects in 1999
- the wide range of English provision at level 3
- good collaborative work with local schools
- the high standard of students' responses in class discussion

Weaknesses

- poor retention rates
- unsatisfactory management of the subject across the college's sites
- some dull teaching
- some unsatisfactory general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) provision

35 The college offers the full range of English and communications subjects at GCE A level. Students on the access to higher education course study core English topics covering a range of preparatory study skills and many also choose the literature module as part of their course. English is a mandatory element on the international baccalaureate course which is run at the college.

36 Teaching in English is thorough. Syllabuses are covered comprehensively and teachers are knowledgeable about their subject area. However, inspectors did not agree with the self-assessment report that teaching is of a high quality. Many lessons are flat and uninspiring.

Teachers do not always adapt their approaches to meet the needs of individual students. As the college recognises, schemes of work and lesson plans contain little detailed reference to methods of teaching and learning or to the resources that are required. Each student has a target minimum grade which is agreed at entry. Performance is regularly reviewed against this grade. The review also covers other matters, for example attendance, punctuality, level of co-operation with other students and extent of contribution in class. This review initiative has only recently been introduced. Inspectors saw that there was some use of IT in lessons, but agreed with the college that this practice needs to be adopted more widely in the curriculum area.

37 Students' written work is of an appropriate standard. Their assessed work is returned promptly and feedback from teachers is thorough and constructive. In an access to higher education group the tutor drew learning points from her assessment of students' work to use as a basis for discussion. Students' contributions to class discussion demonstrate a mature, sophisticated and intelligent response to the subjects.

38 Management of the curriculum across the college's sites is not well co-ordinated. New arrangements have been established and there is a strong lead from curriculum managers to ensure a consistent approach and the sharing of good practice. A cross-college English team has recently met and begun work on standardising syllabuses across college sites. However, these measures have not as yet had a significant effect. The college is part of a consortium with local schools. English curriculum leaders from three schools and the college meet termly to develop common approaches to the design and teaching of the subject. School students may study part of their GCE A level programme at college or re-sit GCSE English in the evening there. These strengths were not included in the self-assessment report.

Curriculum Areas

39 Teachers are well qualified and experienced. Half of them have higher degrees and many have experience as examiners. Library stock is adequate. Students have good access to computers in the resource centres. Many of the classrooms used for English teaching on the St Albans City campus are in a poor state. There are few displays of students' work or other stimulus materials in the rooms.

40 Inspectors agreed that achievement in GCE A level English subjects in 1999 was good. The pass rate on GCE A level English language was 100%; 75% of completing students achieved grades A to C. Comparative national percentages were 86% and 40%, respectively. GCE A level English literature results were above the national benchmark at 93%. GCE A level communication studies results were almost 20% above national averages in 1997 and 1998. In these years the higher grades of A to C formed 69% and 50%, respectively, of all passes

in the subject, compared with a national benchmark of 46%. In 1999, however, results in communication studies declined significantly, only 48% of completing students achieving the qualification. Of those students who complete the access to higher education course, a high proportion progresses to higher education. In 1999, the figure was 89%. Results on the GCSE English course were poor. Only 45% of completing students achieved a grade C or above compared with a national average of 49%. The college acknowledges the need to develop alternative accreditation at level 2 to meet the needs more effectively of those students for whom GCSE grade C is not a realistic goal. The retention rate in English is poor, a weakness underestimated in the self-assessment report. The retention rate on English language GCE A level in 1999 was 10% below the national benchmark; on the language and literature GCE A level in 1999 it was 18% below.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in English and communication studies, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
GCSE English	2	Number of starters	*	*	292
		Retention (%)	*	*	*
		Achievement (%)	*	*	45
GCE A level English language	3	Number of starters	*	*	34
		Retention (%)	*	*	*
		Achievement (%)	*	*	100
GCE A level English literature	3	Number of starters	*	*	*
		Retention (%)	*	*	*
		Achievement (%)	*	*	93
GCE A level English language/literature	3	Number of starters	*	*	58
		Retention (%)	*	*	59
		Achievement (%)	*	*	83
GCE A level communication studies	3	Number of starters	*	*	36
		Retention (%)	*	*	81
		Achievement (%)	*	*	48

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

*data may be unreliable

Curriculum Areas

Provision for Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities

Grade 2

41 Inspectors observed 11 lessons. The sample of learning programmes inspected included those for students with profound and complex learning difficulties, those with severe learning difficulties and those with moderate learning difficulties. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report but found some strengths in teaching and learning had been overstated.

Key strengths

- a strong commitment to inclusive learning
- effective procedures for tracking individual students' progress on some programmes
- effective links with outside agencies
- good progress by students towards individual goals

Weaknesses

- insufficient use of IT
- insufficient formal communication between staff teaching on modular programmes

42 The college is strongly committed to inclusive learning; this is reflected in the bringing together of the groups of students on these courses with students on other college courses. Programmes and modules for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are located in the curriculum area which offers the best curriculum match. Programmes for students with profound and complex learning difficulties and/or disabilities were moved in September 1999 from a location some distance away to a purpose-built centre on the Oaklands campus. Learning programmes are offered on

the four main sites. There has been substantial growth in the number of adult students from residential care homes and centres who attend modular courses. In 1998-99, 461 adult students enrolled on at least one module. There were also 71 full-time and 21 part-time 16 to 18 year old students. College staff work effectively with a wide range of community agencies. These include care homes and centres, health and social services and the voluntary sector. Staff also work with local schools to plan students' transition to the college. They are involved in multi-agency reviews of students. These partnerships have enabled the college to expand its provision. The strength of these partnerships is recognised in the self-assessment report.

43 Formal communication between some staff working with students is underdeveloped. Staff and students are dispersed across the sites. Part-time staff are not always able to attend meetings. There is no forum in which student support assistants can meet. A group of senior campus co-ordinators meets regularly. Assessment procedures vary. Some learning programmes show clear links between initial assessment, subject assessments and the development of individual learning goals. Progress towards goals is clearly monitored and reviewed. In other programmes, the process is less clear and consistent. The self-assessment report recognises this weakness in the adult modular provision. The college has also noted in the self-assessment report that the lack of a corporate approach to admissions has led to difficulties.

44 There is some good, well-planned teaching. Students are often actively engaged in meaningful tasks. Teachers and support staff work as a team and are sensitive to the students' needs. Staffing ratios are good, allowing for small-group and individual work. Almost 50% of the teaching staff have a specialist qualification relating to working with students with learning difficulties.

Curriculum Areas

Management of students' behaviour is good. Students are challenged appropriately. Their success in meeting individual goals is openly confirmed by teachers during lessons. Staff use a variety of ways, which are skilfully built into the learning process, to affirm students' successes and build up their confidence. However, strengths in teaching were overstated in the self-assessment report. In some less effective lessons, teaching methods restricted opportunities for individual learning. In some lessons, support assistants were not managed effectively in their work with individual students. Tasks were not always set at the appropriate level and the approach was not always suited to the age of the students. The self-assessment report did not identify these weaknesses. IT is not used as an integral part of students' learning experiences, although some students have IT lessons. The self-assessment report identified that not all staff were confident in using IT as a teaching tool. Students' work, in some areas, is good and shows improvement over a period of time. Students on full-time and substantive part-time programmes have a personal tutor who monitors their overall progress. Students are positive about the support that they receive from staff.

45 Most students achieve either an individual learning goal or a primary qualification. The college is refining a scheme to monitor students' progress towards achieving these aims. College data for 1998-99 show that 96.8% of students completing their programme achieved their primary learning goal. Retention rates on these programmes are 88% for part-time students and 83% for full-time students.

Curriculum Areas

Basic Skills

Grade 2

46 Inspectors observed 11 lessons. They broadly agreed with the self-assessment reports produced by the three areas inspected. Some significant strengths and weaknesses had not been identified by the college.

Key strengths

- highly effective initial assessment
- most teaching effective
- students' high level of personal achievement
- effective target-setting and monitoring of students' progress
- wide variety of appropriate learning contexts
- effective management of provision

Weaknesses

- narrow range of teaching methods
- insufficient use of IT
- insufficient development of basic skills within vocational courses

47 The college provides basic skills support in three ways: group sessions where the primary learning goal for over 350 students is to improve their literacy or numeracy skills; individual support to help students acquire the basic skills required for courses at level 1 or entry level; and support integrated with foundation or entry level programmes in vocational or academic subjects. Students are encouraged to take accreditation where appropriate. In 1998-99, 24% of those with basic skills as a primary goal took up and achieved external accreditation. Students receiving individual support gain external accreditation through their mainstream programmes and those on vocational programmes at foundation or entry level undertake key skills accreditation.

48 Inspectors agreed with the college that a major strength of the provision is the emphasis on accurate and detailed assessment of individual learning needs. Initial assessments for full-time students identify effectively those who need support in basic skills. A more detailed assessment identifies clear targets, specifically linked to the student's programme of study. Students' progress is reported back to personal tutors as part of the college system of review. These arrangements mean that most teachers are able to design an effective teaching programme to meet the needs of individuals. Individual programmes of study are carefully planned and recorded. Learning materials are appropriate to the level and interests of students and, where relevant, to their other courses. When students are taught in groups, however, this emphasis on individual attention reduces opportunities for them to develop wider communication and personal skills and to benefit from an additional range of learning experiences. This narrow range of teaching methods was not mentioned in the self-assessment report. Within vocational courses, lesson planning and schemes of work are based on the requirements of the accreditation for the main qualification aim. In one area, however, vocational staff effectively undertook the basic skills tuition, using the specialist staff as consultants. Inspectors agreed that there was insufficient use of IT across the area. There was no use of audiovisual equipment in any lessons, despite the limited reading and writing skills of many of the students.

49 The varied provision is well managed. This strength was not recognised in the self-assessment report. Arrangements for teaching provide varied contexts in which students can be helped to learn. They include: group sessions; 'drop-in' workshops; one-to-one sessions; in-course support; lessons integrated with mainstream courses; and the use of basic skills staff in a consultancy role. Short courses on specific topics which have been introduced

Curriculum Areas

recently encourage many students to progress on to access courses, which have a similar modular approach. The co-ordination of the whole provision, under separate team leaders, is well monitored. Evaluation is effective and appropriately detailed. Team meetings are held regularly and lead to effective action-planning and subsequent implementation of the plans. There are some difficulties in communication between the large number of part-time staff, though well-organised record-keeping ensures that communication about students is efficiently maintained. Resources to support teaching and learning are readily available at all centres. There is some over-reliance on paper-based materials. There has been insufficient development of teaching materials for basic skills that are linked to vocational areas, and this shortcoming has an impact upon the motivation of students at entry and foundation

level. Students have reasonable access to computers but the software available is inadequate.

50 Students' achievements are well monitored. Staff set themselves clear targets and largely meet them. The targets include the rate of retention of students receiving one-to-one support. Retention patterns have been analysed and the results have been used to produce effective ways of improving the rate of retention. For students taking qualifications in literacy and communications, achievements improved in 1998-99. The college enters fewer students for numeracy and application of number awards and has a lower success rate. The development of college procedures to measure achievement against students' primary learning goals is well advanced. The setting and review of targets enables students' achievements to be monitored accurately against predicted results. Students are able to keep track of their own progress and to experience the sense of achievement that strengthens their confidence.

A summary of retention and achievement rates in basic skills, 1997 to 1999

Type of qualification	Level	Numbers and outcome	Completion year		
			1997	1998	1999
Literacy (primary provision)	Entry	Number of starters	*	*	89
		Retention (%)	*	*	73
		Achievement (%)	*	*	75
Literacy (primary provision)	Entry	Number of starters	*	*	12
		Retention (%)	*	*	100
		Achievement (%)	*	*	92
Numeracy (primary provision)	Entry	Number of starters	*	*	2
		Retention (%)	*	*	100
		Achievement (%)	*	*	50
Numeracy (primary provision)	1	Number of starters	*	*	13
		Retention (%)	*	*	100
		Achievement (%)	*	*	85
Numeracy/application of number (integrated provision)	1	Number of starters	*	*	75
		Retention (%)	*	*	68
		Achievement (%)	*	*	88
Communications/literacy (integrated provision)	1	Number of starters	*	*	88
		Retention (%)	*	*	74
		Achievement (%)	*	*	84

Source: ISR (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

*data may be unreliable

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Support for Students

Grade 2

51 Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements in the self-assessment report. They also found some additional strengths and weaknesses.

Key strengths

- good pre-entry guidance and admissions procedures
- comprehensive arrangements for students with additional learning requirements
- high uptake of additional learning support for students needing help
- an effective and wide variety of support services for students

Weaknesses

- ineffective recording of students' progress
- the poor quality of plans for the improvement of students' performance

52 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the college has an effective, co-ordinated approach across all main campuses in the provision for prospective students of good pre-enrolment information and impartial guidance. This approach was also recognised as a strength at the previous inspection. Publicity material is attractively presented and informative. Open days, 'taster' sessions and summer schools are effective in helping students to decide which courses they want to study. Students who are undecided about their choice are referred for a general guidance interview. Where appropriate, staff suggest suitable provision that is offered by other organisations. The admissions service deals with applications quickly and efficiently. An effective telephone enrolment service is available for some part-time courses. Most students found the enrolment and induction programme informative and helpful.

Guidelines used by curriculum areas are clear, though there is some variability in the standard of induction programmes.

53 The quality of most tutorials is at least satisfactory, sometimes good. Students find tutors helpful and supportive. The document on tutorial arrangements sets out clearly what tutors provide for students. The tutorial system is organised through the senior tutors and the tutorial co-ordinator. Each student has a personal tutor. For part-time students the tutor is the class teacher. Tutorials include both group and individual sessions. Tutorial schemes of work, in a number of instances, are limited to lists of topics. The college has no handbook of guidance for tutors, although one is being developed. Inspectors did not agree with the self-assessment report that the reviewing of students' progress is a strength. They found that most written tutorial reviews are not thorough and that a number are not completed. Action plans to improve students' performance are insufficiently specific. There is very little use of target dates and some plans have not been completed.

54 As the self-assessment report indicates, there are comprehensive arrangements to support students with additional learning requirements. These arrangements include help with communications and study skills, numeracy, and appropriate support for students who are dyslexic. Materials are adapted and specialist equipment and support services are provided to meet students' individual learning requirements. Most students on full-time and on substantive part-time programmes receive a diagnostic assessment for literacy and numeracy. Tutors can refer students for support and students can also refer themselves. Once on their courses, students can obtain help as part of their programme of study, or through individual appointments or by calling at the additional learning support workshops. The take up by those identified as needing support is high. Most written records of students' progress

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and the learning plans for students receiving help from additional learning support tutors are thorough. The disability statement is comprehensive and clear. It is available in Braille, large print and on audiotape, and a version can be provided for those who have difficulty with reading.

55 The college provides careers services and facilities to help students applying to higher education and moving to employment. At each main campus there is an adequately resourced area for careers that includes software packages, books and university prospectuses, and some details on job vacancies. Full-time and a number of part-time students receive careers education as part of their programme of study. The college has a partnership agreement with the local careers service whose advisers provide individual guidance interviews, career talks and special support for students who have been identified as being at risk of leaving their course early. The college provides guidance and help on course and career options for students after the publication of examination results. As the self-assessment report recognises, there is no overall co-ordination of careers and progression guidance at the college.

56 The range of personal services for students is good. These include: guidance and assistance on finance; benefits and welfare; advocacy both internally and with external agencies; promotion of health education issues; and advice about residential accommodation. There is an ecumenical chaplaincy. A personal counselling service, staffed by qualified counsellors, is available. Students are referred to external agencies for help where appropriate. The college provides a good range of childcare arrangements. These include nursery facilities for children aged between three months and five years old, breakfast, after-school and holiday clubs, and support through its access fund for students who wish to use childminders. Arrangements for the administration and allocation of grants from the access and

hardship funds are effective. The college, supported by the active student union, runs an established programme of sporting and social activities.

General Resources

Grade 3

57 Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the self-assessment report. They identified additional weaknesses.

Key strengths

- an effective strategy to rationalise the college's accommodation
- the extensive range of services in resource centres
- effective support for developments in information and learning technology

Weaknesses

- the poor standard of some teaching accommodation
- insufficient study spaces in resource centres
- unsatisfactory access for people with restricted mobility
- poor space utilisation

58 The college operates from four main campuses and a number of smaller sites in central and southern Hertfordshire. Nearly 50% of students are based at St Albans City campus, the largest campus. The accommodation consists of 38 buildings, ranging from converted Victorian residences to purpose-built teaching blocks constructed in the 1960s and 1990s. The Welwyn Garden City and Borehamwood campuses were built mainly in the 1960s. The Oaklands campus is set in an attractive rural setting on the outskirts of St Albans and includes a commercial farm which supports the land-based curriculum. The college has a

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planned maintenance programme and requests for work are dealt with efficiently. The standard of some teaching accommodation is poor. Many teaching rooms are drab and in need of refurbishment and redecoration. Few teaching rooms and general circulation areas have displays of students' work. The buildings at Highfield Lane are in a poor state of repair. On some campuses parts of buildings are unused as they are unsuitable for either teaching or administration. The college has carried out a detailed appraisal of its buildings. Inspectors agreed with the college that there is a clear strategy for future development of the college's estate. Space utilisation in the college is well below the sector average, a weakness not identified in the self-assessment report. The college has recently introduced a computerised timetabling system to achieve a more efficient allocation of classrooms.

59 The campuses at St Albans City, Welwyn Garden City and Borehamwood have attractive reception areas that provide welcoming focal points for students and visitors. The reception area at Oaklands campus is less welcoming. Reception staff are well informed and provide a helpful service. Standards of cleanliness vary. The Welwyn Garden City and Borehamwood campuses are clean and tidy. There is poor signage on all campuses and circulation routes around sites are confusing. Car parking is sometimes difficult. At the St Albans City campus the college has sought to remedy the parking problem by introducing an effective managed car parking scheme in association with a private company.

60 The college's disability statement does not include a full analysis of the accessibility of all its buildings. In spite of some improvements since the last inspection, many parts of the college are inaccessible for people with restricted mobility. There is no lift access to first floor rooms at the Oaklands campus or the Welwyn Garden City campus. At St Albans City campus there are few direct routes between

buildings to help people in wheelchairs. These shortcomings are acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Lessons are timetabled to accommodate students with mobility difficulties in the most convenient rooms. The college has recently been successful in its application for an accessibility improvement grant.

61 Inspectors agreed that support for developments in information and learning technology is effective. A computer network links the four main campuses and the college has established a high-bandwidth connection with other Hertfordshire colleges. The ratio of students to computers is about 10:1. There is a good level of technical support for students and staff. Each of the main campuses has a resource centre. Centre staff provide informative induction sessions for students to promote the facilities and services on offer. These include television and sound studios which are available at two campuses and video-conferencing facilities. Inspectors agreed that the resource centres are well organised and well maintained. However, they do not provide sufficient space for the number of students who wish to use them and have inadequate facilities for private study. The college has recently installed a computerised library management system which is accessible by the Internet. This facility enables students to search the catalogues of all Hertfordshire colleges while studying at home. All staff have access to electronic mail facilities and there is generous provision of computers in staff workrooms.

62 The college has a variety of facilities that support a wide range of recreational activities. These include a well-equipped fitness studio, extensive playing fields and the main hall. The college has formed effective links with local leisure centres to provide access to a wider range of sporting activities. All campuses have recreational areas for students. The college has recently improved its cafeteria facilities. A satisfactory range of food is now available at

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each of the main campuses. The college provides childcare facilities at St Albans City campus and Welwyn Garden City campus. A total of 45 places are available; at the time of the inspection, demand exceeded provision.

Quality Assurance

Grade 2

63 Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report.

Key strengths

- a long-standing and productive commitment to quality assurance
- the effective use of clients' views
- the successful inclusion of business support teams in quality assurance procedures
- an effective self-assessment process
- well-managed staff development

Weaknesses

- inadequate data for quality assurance purposes
- inconsistencies in the completion of records
- insufficient linkage of improvement strategies to target-setting

64 The college has a long-standing commitment to improving the standard of provision. Quality assurance processes have been evolving since before incorporation. Self-assessment was established in 1994-95, and business support teams have become increasingly involved in the process. The overall framework for assuring quality was revised significantly for 1997-98, and again for 1999-2000.

65 Quality assurance processes have brought about major changes in college procedures and facilities. These changes include the

reorganisation of the 'information fair' for new students, the introduction of direct enrolment, and improvements to refectory services. The quality of lessons has improved since the last inspection. The college has previously had difficulty in assessing the overall effects of its quality assurance systems because centrally held data relating to the performance of students have been unreliable. Difficulties with data are included as a weakness in the self-assessment report. College data provided at the time of the inspection suggest that a decline in retention rates has been arrested and that retention is now improving overall. The data shows general improvement in achievements over the last three years, though poor achievements were recorded in some specific areas in 1997-98.

66 Students' views, gathered through a range of activities, are taken seriously and acted upon, a strength recognised in the self-assessment report. Questionnaires about college and course concerns are followed up by discussions with groups of students, to clarify the issues they have raised. There has been an improvement in students' perceptions of the college, as a result of these activities. Students sit on more than 100 groups, including course teams. The complaints system is well known to students. The service commitments made in the college charter are monitored and a report on college performance is made annually to the college management team. Employers' views of the college's services are gathered and have influenced improvements in communications between employers and the college. Some service areas of the college use questionnaires to determine their clients' views, for example on the reprographics service for staff.

67 In 1998-99, the course review process was changed. The changes have contributed to some confusion in the implementation of the new procedures. Curriculum teams keep course logs which place the main emphasis on students' performance, require teams to address the significant issues which have arisen from

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student questionnaires, and check that the main aspects of course organisation are in place. The logs are intended to provide evidence for self-assessment by the course teams. Some logs are completed fully and concisely. However, others are incomplete or cursory in response and lack critical analysis and evaluation. Teaching teams regularly discuss issues surrounding rates of attendance, retention and achievement, and consider ways to improve them. Retention targets are proposed before the start of the academic year for planning purposes and formal targets for retention and achievement are then set late in the academic planning cycle. Neither process is clearly linked to improvement strategies. Data are sometimes interpreted differently by teams. The self-assessment report identifies these inconsistencies. Business support teams in the college have service standards and associated targets. These have been developed from recognised national standards, by comparison with other colleges, or from previous performance. Most teams have reported on their performance against these standards in at least one round of self-assessment. The self-assessment report recognises the progress made in including support teams in the quality assurance process.

68 The college's self-assessment is well planned. The extensive lesson observation programme makes a significant contribution to the process. Each full-time teacher is observed three times annually, including in tutorials. All part-time teachers are observed at least once. Observation grades are aggregated to give an overall view of teaching quality in the curriculum area. However, the grade profiles are higher than those awarded by inspectors. Curriculum and business support teams produce draft reports and action plans, which are scrutinised by middle managers before the final self-assessment report is produced. A self-assessment review group meets regularly to endorse team self-assessments, and to compile the whole-college report.

Senior managers, as the corporate monitoring group, carry out additional lesson observations and confirm the main conclusions of the report through interviews with curriculum and section managers. Inspectors agreed with most of the judgements in the report.

69 A revised appraisal system, covering all staff, was instituted in 1998-99 following the reorganisation of the staffing structure. The system is clearly focused on performance. The process is viewed as positive by staff at all levels. The staff development programme is well managed and influenced by corporate needs, by training needs raised by course teams and service units, and by the results of appraisal. Much of the training is provided in college or by disseminating the training experiences of individual members of staff. The programme has included training for managers in their new roles. The needs of individual managers are now being analysed so that their management skills can be developed appropriately. The strengths in staff development are included in the self-assessment report.

Governance

Grade 3

70 The self-assessment report was clearly written. Strengths and weaknesses were generally supported by appropriate evidence. However, inspectors did not agree with the significance that the college attached to either the strengths or the weaknesses. They also identified an additional strength and weakness.

Key strengths

- the wide range of relevant skills and high commitment of governors
- the effective contribution to the development of strategic aims
- strong links between governors and some curriculum areas

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Weaknesses

- the lack of accurate quantitative information on college performance
- insufficient reporting to the corporation on some aspects of the college's work
- inadequate evaluation by governors of the corporation's performance
- appropriate procedures not always followed in some committees

71 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its assessment, the governance of the college is adequate. The corporation substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

72 The corporation has recently redetermined a membership of 16, including staff and student governors. At the time of the inspection there were two vacancies. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that governors possess a range of relevant skills and demonstrate a high level of commitment to the college. Overall attendance levels at meetings are satisfactory. Governors attend college events and have used their skills to the benefit of the college, for example, supporting the development of the quality assurance framework. There are long-standing and effective links between governors and some curriculum areas, where governors work as members of advisory groups. This strength was not identified in the self-assessment report. Governors have a clear understanding of their strategic responsibilities and of the distinction between their role and the management of the college. New members receive an induction handbook, and are briefed on the college and their own roles and responsibilities. The training needs of governors are not systematically assessed and there is no programme of training for them.

73 The business of governance is conducted through committees for finance and general purposes, curriculum, search, remuneration and audit. Corporation procedures are collated in a governors' handbook and standing orders guide the conduct of business. Some terms of reference and procedures need developing and updating. Governors have adopted a code of conduct and a 'whistleblowing' policy. A register of interests is maintained for all governors and some college managers. The governors do not sign an annual declaration confirming their eligibility to act as governors. Letters of appointment and reappointment are not sent to governors. Corporation agendas, minutes and the register of interests are publicly available and an annual meeting is held for college stakeholders. The corporation acted quickly to fill a vacancy for the post of clerk to the corporation by appointing, on an interim basis, a firm of chartered secretaries. The clerk has reviewed governance arrangements and made recommendations for improvements.

74 Although not identified as a weakness by the college, some of the corporation's committees have not followed appropriate procedures fully. The search committee has not conducted a formal skills audit of governors and gives insufficient scrutiny to reappointments. Vacancies are filled through invited applications. The curriculum committee has revised its terms of reference to include matters involving quality assurance, monitoring of students' performance, and consideration of strategic curriculum issues. Clerking arrangements for the remuneration committee are insufficiently defined and the committee is not required to report to the full corporation. Senior postholders are appraised annually against individual objectives which are not directly related to the college's strategic objectives.

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75 Inspectors did not agree that there was fully effective monitoring of all aspects of the college's financial performance. The finance and general purposes committee receives the monthly management accounts at its meetings on nine occasions each year. The management accounts do not contain sufficient information and FEFC income forecasts in 1998-99 were not accurate. The corporation has not received any reports of progress being made in improving the accuracy of forecasts. Although the finance and general purposes committee receives reports twice each year on franchising activities, they are insufficiently detailed.

76 Governors contribute effectively to the development of the college's mission and strategic aims. However, they have not formally approved the college's annual operating objectives. Governors monitor the strategic plan through a half-yearly review of the operational objectives. These objectives do not explicitly address the need to raise achievements and contain few directly measurable targets. Governors receive an annual report on rates of student retention and achievement. The self-assessment report recognises that further development is needed to provide accurate and timely information to the corporation in order that it can monitor effectively the impact of improvement strategies in all areas of the college's work. The annual reporting cycle does not include coverage of the college charter, students' complaints or equal opportunities. The self-assessment report recognises the need to develop and extend the range of annual reports to the corporation.

77 The corporation uses a self-assessment questionnaire to evaluate its own performance. The questionnaire is considered at a residential seminar and a programme of action to improve performance is agreed. However, as noted in the self-assessment report, governors lack clear criteria against which to evaluate their performance.

Management

Grade 2

78 Inspectors agreed with most of the key strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report. They identified an additional strength and a weakness.

Key strengths

- strong leadership
- a well-developed framework for strategic and operational planning
- good use of national reports for planning purposes
- effective systems of communication and consultation
- productive links with external organisations
- good procedures for financial reporting

Weaknesses

- inaccurate data on rates of retention and achievement
- underdeveloped monitoring and reporting of equal opportunities
- inaccurate financial forecasting in 1998-99

79 Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment report that the recent college reorganisation has contributed to more effective, open and collaborative management. Staff appreciate the open and consultative way in which reorganisation was implemented with the minimum of disruption. This strength was not identified in the self-assessment report. All staff have updated job descriptions and understand their roles and responsibilities within the current structure. Managers with new and wider roles have received relevant management training. Managers working within the new structure are more easily able to achieve the college objectives, can make more effective use of resources, and are increasing the level of

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co-operation between curriculum areas.

The executive team is responsible for strategic management and is the major decision-making body of the college. Its meetings are effective and well minuted. The college management team, comprising the executive team, the 12 heads of curriculum areas and other key cross-college managers, meets every three weeks and is responsible for the implementation of the operational aims. The academic board plays an active role in the development of the college. A staff briefing every three weeks by members of the college management team provides regular updates on developments within and beyond the college. The principal provides opportunities for staff to meet her individually once each term in each of the four main campuses in order to discuss any issues of concern. College staff consider managers to be open and approachable. The line management structure and regular team meetings enable staff to contribute to decision-making and to obtain information that is directly relevant to them. Agendas reflect the requirements of the college's planning and quality assurance cycles.

80 The college's three-year strategic plan provides a clear framework within which the college can develop. The annual review of strategic objectives benefits from extensive and thorough consultation within the college. Good use is made of relevant national reports and initiatives in shaping strategic development. The college's operating objectives are used effectively by curriculum area and support teams in the production of their annual operating business plans. Progress being made on the business plans is closely monitored at management meetings and as part of the termly review of all full-time staff. Inspectors considered that target-setting, to assist in the monitoring of performance indicators and achievement of strategic aims, was underdeveloped.

81 College policies are not systematically reviewed and monitored. In particular, as the self-assessment report recognises, the college's equal opportunities policy is not monitored effectively across the college. The procedures of the monitoring group for equal opportunities have been revised. It was too early at the time of the inspection to assess their impact.

82 As the self-assessment report stated, the college has good links with a wide range of external organisations. These links include productive relationships with Hertfordshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), Hertfordshire County Council, and the local district councils. Information on labour market needs is made available to managers for use in curriculum planning.

83 The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the college's financial management is adequate. The college's financial position has considerably improved following the disposal of a small Hatfield campus in 1998. A qualified accountant, who is a member of the executive team, heads the finance team. Monthly management accounts and budget holder reports are produced extremely promptly, normally within five days of the month end. The management accounts have recently been revised and report historical and forecast information but contain limited information on some aspects of college operations. Student unit and income forecasts have not always been accurate. The full extent of a small financial deficit in 1998-99 only became apparent after the year-end and was not recognised in the management accounts for the year. This was not identified as a weakness by the college. The monthly management accounts are considered at management meetings. Recently updated financial regulations are comprehensive and have been widely distributed. There have been some delays in making returns of student records to the FEFC.

Cross-college Provision

84 Inadequacies in the management of college information before 1998-99 resulted in the college being unable to provide accurate data on students' achievements and retention to the FEFC for 1996-97 and 1997-98. As a result data presented to inspectors were not fully reliable. The lack of accurate data until 1998-99 prevents the college from monitoring trends in students' performance over several years. The college recognises this weakness and is implementing an action plan to address it.

Conclusions

85 The college's self-assessment report was comprehensive and well focused. It drew on reports produced by all curriculum and support teams and by the governors. The report made reference to a useful range of evidence against which inspectors could check the judgements made. It provided a good basis for planning the inspection. Inspectors largely agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report, though some strengths and weaknesses identified by inspectors had not been recognised. Appropriate action had been taken to address some of the weaknesses since the report was produced. Inspectors agreed with three of the five cross-college grades; in two areas they awarded a lower grade. In four of the curriculum areas, inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment grades. In one curriculum area inspectors awarded a higher grade and in two a lower one.

86 Strengths and weaknesses identified during the inspection are listed under each section of this report. The main strengths and weaknesses are identified in the summary.

College Statistics

Student numbers by age (February 2000)

<i>Age</i>	<i>%</i>
Under 16	2
16-18 years	35
19-24 years	15
25+ years	48
Not known	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by level of study (February 2000)

<i>Level of study</i>	<i>%</i>
Level 1 (foundation)	39
Level 2 (intermediate)	24
Level 3 (advanced)	35
Level 4/5 (higher)	2
Non-schedule 2	0
Total	100

Source: college data

Student numbers by mode of attendance and curriculum area (February 2000)

<i>Programme area</i>	<i>Full time</i>	<i>Part time</i>	<i>Total provision %</i>
Science	999	673	9
Agriculture	250	567	5
Construction	132	886	6
Engineering	147	932	6
Business	464	1,900	13
Hotel and catering	109	187	2
Health and community care	939	605	9
Art and design	694	2,357	17
Humanities	1,643	2,357	22
Basic education	58	1,859	11
Total	5,435	12,323	100

Source: college data

Widening participation

Based on a postcode analysis of 1995-96 ISR data, the college recruited 4% of students from disadvantaged areas defined in relation to the Department of the Environment Index of Local Conditions.

Staff expressed as full-time equivalents (February 2000)

	<i>Per- manent</i>	<i>Fixed term</i>	<i>Casual</i>	<i>Total</i>
Direct learning contact	331	61	6	398
Supporting direct learning contact	87	0	11	98
Other support	206	0	13	219
Total	624	61	30	715

Source: college data, rounded to nearest full-time equivalent

College Statistics

Three-year Trends

Financial data

	1997	1998	1999
Income	£24,920,000	£25,141,000	£23,037,000
Average level of funding (ALF)	£18.29*	£17.74*	£17.11
Payroll as a proportion of income	68%	63%	67%
Achievement of funding target	100%	100%	97%
Diversity of income	36%	39%	34%
Operating surplus	-£168,000	£1,825,000	-£90,000

Sources: Income - Council Circulars 98/43 (1997), 00/10 (1998), college (1999)

ALF - Funding Allocations 1997-98 (1997 and 1998), Funding Allocations 1998-99 (1999)

Payroll - Council Circulars 98/43 (1997), 00/10 (1998), college (1999)

Achievement of funding target - Performance Indicators 1997-98 (1997 and 1998), college (1999)

Diversity of income - Council Circulars 98/43 (1997), 00/10 (1998), college (1999)

Operating surplus - Council Circulars 98/43 (1997), 00/10 (1998), college (1999)

*provisional data

Students' achievements data

Level	Retention and pass	Students aged 16 to 18			Students aged 19 or over		
		1996	1997	1998	1996	1997	1998
1	Number of starters	947	1,084	1,083	3,016	4,229	3,084
	Retention (%)	89	84	83	87	81	81
	Achievement (%)	30	37	56	41	20	55
2	Number of starters	1,792	2,177	2,112	1,747	1,809	1,619
	Retention (%)	85	74	77	90	85	80
	Achievement (%)	43	63	63	54	55	63
3	Number of starters	1,855	2,264	2,480	1,416	1,563	1,431
	Retention (%)	94	77	70	86	81	75
	Achievement (%)	44	63	65	55	51	5
4 or 5	Number of starters	31	29	18	401	518	416
	Retention (%)	94	90	67	93	88	80
	Achievement (%)	73	82	67	65	44	45
Short courses	Number of starters	311	561	519	3,291	5,181	4,447
	Retention (%)	95	93	94	93	95	92
	Achievement (%)	49	44	53	38	44	48
Unknown/unclassified	Number of starters	283	134	264	1,155	1,246	1,052
	Retention (%)	88	82	85	79	88	81
	Achievement (%)	51	57	33	23	73	44

Source: ISR

Note: 1996 data derived from one ISR only and will therefore underestimate starters and overestimate retention for two-year and longer courses

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